

Walking Into the Heart of God

A Sunday school teacher once asked her students to talk about how they felt about their church. The students responded in the usual ways: some said something silly to get the rest of the class to laugh, while others tried to be more serious. One of the girls was new to the class, and she felt uncomfortable about entering into class discussions, so she never raised her hand, or volunteered an answer. That Sunday, however, she did have an answer for her Sunday school teacher, and it was unforgettable. She said that going to church was, "like walking into the heart of God." I like that. That is a description of the church as it ought to be: "like walking into the heart of God."

We know that is what the church ought to be and not just as we gather together but EVERY where we go! The church is a fellowship, a community of faith – beyond a building but in every contact that we make – every word we speak! If we can't do that, John tells us, we've missed the very heart of the faith that Christ gave us.

The essence of Christian faith is love. John *"Behold, what manner of love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God. . . For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. . . This is how we know that God loves us, because He laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. . . Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action."* A person reading John's words from this epistle might conclude that at the very heart of the Christian Gospel is love" and he or she would be exactly right. But it's not always easy to love.

A man who had been hurt deeply by one of his friends decided he would get revenge. As he was walking around his school campus he thought of various ways to even the score. He saw a sticky burr covered with sharp, porcupine-like thorns that had fallen from a tree and put it in his pocket. His plan was to carry the burr with him until he found the person who had hurt him. Then he would throw the burr down his friend's back and rub it over him causing great pain. But something interesting took place that day as he walked around campus with that burr, looking for the young man who had offended him. Every time he took a step the burr would prick his leg. Every time he sat down, it hurt even more. Finally at the end of the day, he pulled the burr from his pocket and discovered that all the thorns were gone. They were all in his leg. He had wanted to even the score, but instead he discovered that he had only hurt himself. When we want to hurt another, even someone who has done us wrong, we end up hurting ourselves even more. Especially if we claim to be a Christian!

The essence of Christian faith is love. Just as Christ laid down his life for us, so ought we to lay down our lives for others. That means loving all people " even those who misuse us, and that means doing good to all people " even those whom we may not approve of, and that means leaving our comfort zone from time to time for acts of extraordinary concern. The essence of Christian faith is love. That brings us to something else that is important for us to realize. Love is our primary witness to the world. If the day comes when the Christian church is as loving as Jesus, the world will beat a path to our doors.

Love is more than just an emotion or a feeling. Love is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned. Love is not a passive verb, but an active one. And it is the primary way we share Christ with the world. Love is our primary witness to the world. As the saying goes, "People don't care how much we know until they know how much we care." But there's one thing more that we need to see. Love Is A Gift From God.

There's a bumper sticker that reads: "Perform an unnatural act" love somebody." And it's true. Pure love is not an attribute of humanity, but of God. Our nature is to strive for survival. God's nature is self-giving love. The closer we are to God, the better able we are to love others. John writes, "And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us." That Spirit is love.

The words John wrote centuries ago are still true for us today, "And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us." When the love of God truly abides in our heart, we are able to look into the faces of others and see God's face. Love is the essence of Christian faith. Love is our primary witness to the world. Love is a gift from God. We love because God first loved us. Only as we abide in God can His love abide in us. Only then will coming to church be like walking into the very heart of God.